THE DONKEY DISASTER OF SOUTHERN AFRICA


Peta Jones,
Donkey Power Consultancy, PO Box 1695, Musina 0900, South Africa. Email <asstute@lantic.net>

ABSTRACT
Throughout the Third World, including most of Africa, surprising numbers of donkeys are kept, and the demand for them can be high. They are kept for work and life style. Primarily transport, but also cultivation too. There is a good reason to suppose that work donkeys can have a positive effect on donkey welfare. With their African origins to adapt them to the environments, donkeys in Africa have line major health issues. Welfare issues arise mainly from poor management, and where traditional knowledge is disappearing with modern life invading, this is becoming more acute. Where donkeys are of relatively recent introduction, such as in southern Africa where they came only half a millennium ago, appropriate equipment has never been developed. Instead, it was assumed that horse and as equipment would do, all that wounds and deformities dominate the list of problems. When horses were domesticated some 5000 years ago, they were selected back for their ease in the difficulty experienced by humans in assigning value to work. Why the need for draft does not translate into a valuation of work is a philosophical question, but one way or another the welfare and survival of donkeys depends on the answer. Meanwhile we must do what we can to raise the status of donkeys, and various strategies are listed and analysed. Management deficits mainly have their origins in ignorance, but fundamental to ignorance and lack of care is the assumption that work itself can have a positive effect on donkey welfare.

CONSEQUENCES
- Became common to use two (or more) donkeys abreast as a matter of course, and carts and wagons were constructed accordingly.
- The central shaft was hung by its front end over the necks of donkeys. However, as donkeys are insectores, they fidget.
- This meant that one of two bad things had to happen, with potential to cause wounds:

INTRODUCTION

From the first evidence for domestication, more than 5000 years ago, it is clear that donkeys were primarily used for backloading, as they still are in most parts of the world. When they were first used for draft is debatable. Perhaps the onager (a related species now wholly wild), but perhaps Equus asinus ariatherus itself was used for drawing war chariots in ancient Mesopotamia. In any case, the practice did not persist. Horses eventually took over.

In southern Africa, however, something very different happened. Maybe because roads only became available after European colonization and settlement. One can guess that such colonizers – Dutch, English, German – did not know donkeys very well, and when wheeled vehicles were to be drawn, they first thought of horses, and the sorts of vehicle commonly used by horses.

NET RESULTS
- Almost all working donkeys thus used display open wounds. Although some may originate with uncastrated jacks, most wounds are caused by hitching problems – so all are management problems – and are the main donkey health focus of welfare and veterinary agencies in southern Africa.
- The wounds and their causes impact on donkey functioning, leading to perceptions of donkey inadequacy and so reducing their value.
- Such results are sadly interactive: the worse the equipment, the worse the performance of donkeys, the lower the value of them and their work, the lower the value of donkeys and their work, the worse the equipment. A descending spiral.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Commitment to be provided by –
- Not individual donkey- or cart-owners, but a community-based supervisory organization which can –
- Afford to buy or make a WHOLE powerset and initiate its use
- Follow up on use until user accustomed and happy, ready to recommend to others.

A SOLUTION IS AVAILABLE

After a couple of decades of experiment, development and use, a way to make donkeys comfortable and efficient when hitched to a single-shaft cart has been developed.

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This meant that one of two bad things had to happen, with potential to cause wounds:

EITHER
- The strap will move forward onto the donkey’s neck, so that the neck takes the full vertical weight as transmitted through the shaft.
- The donkey will have to push on the transverse pole holding the neckstrap, rather than on a harness strap, in order to move the vehicle forward.

Not only does wounding easily occur, but the donkey’s endurance and efficiency are much reduced, contributing to its being regarded as a low-value animal.

In contrast to most of the rest of Africa, bits, blinkers and reins are used despite their not being required for donkey guidance and management. However, because donkeys are considered to be of such low value, these are made as cheaply as possible, so that bits are actually constructed of wire.

Furthermore, in the interests of cheapness, very simplified harnesses are used, made of rubber machine belting, bolted together and repaired with wire, another source of wounds. It is also very rare to see any form breeching to enable the animals to back.

To save on equipment, extra animals are no longer attached tandem, but abreast with their traces either directly to the vehicle or to the animal alongside.

The preferred draft animal for cultivation, until very recently, seems to have been the ox. Only when paved roads became common did donkey-drawn vehicles become feasible. In most of Africa, where donkeys have been used longest, carts (2 wheels) and even wagons (4 wheels) are provided with two shafts so that they can be pulled by one animal.

Currently called a ‘powerset’ to emphasize the fact that the hitching elements are more important than the harnessing, this has the advantages of being –
- Cheap and easy to make (e.g. harness straps braided from strips of a range of materials, including recycled).
- Easy to use, with no unfamiliar elements.
- Quick and easy to repair/replace elements.
- Adjustable to fit individual animals.

PROBLEMS OF ADOPTION

Users, not perceiving the problems, see no reason to change.

Instruction manuals available from the SPC (main animal welfare agency in South Africa) as well as from the Agricultural Research Council still advocate and illustrate the use of the neckstrap for donkeys, not seeing as main source of injury.

Effecting any change, however elementary, takes effort that is liable to be postponed when not apparently urgent.

Demonstration is not enough. Active and frequent follow-ups are required to ensure proper adoption.